DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 295 192 CS 211 286

AUTHOR Litton, Joyce A.
TITLE How To Be a Young Member of the Middle Class: Socialization in the Novels of Judy Blume.
PUB DATE Mar 88
NOTE 14p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Popular Culture Association (18th, New Orleans, LA, March 23-26, 1988).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Book/Product Reviews (072)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Adolescent Development; *Adolescent Literature; Adolescents; Ethical Instruction; *Literature Appreciation; Middle Class Culture; *Moral Development; Popular Culture; Reading Materials; Social Values
IDENTIFIERS *Blume (Judy)

ABSTRACT

The widespread popularity of the young adult novels of Judy Blume makes them important factors in the socialization process. Almost all of the characters in her books are members of the middle or upper-middle class, and with the exception of some of the characters in 4 of her 15 novels, all are white. Thus, Blume is teaching youth how to be members of the white, middle, or upper-middle class. Blume's books deal with various problems which are of importance to young people. Her treatment of religion is well balanced though homogeneous, as illustrated in "Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret." The controversial topic of developing sexuality is treated in several of Blume's novels, including "Are You There God," "Deenie," "Then Again, Maybe I Won't," and "Forever." Blume deals with the topic of death in "Forever" and "Tiger Eyes," and her treatment of death gives young people some idea about what normal feelings are, as Blume defines them. By creating believable young characters and fallible parents, Blume develops an ideal situations for furthering her values. (Seven footnotes are attached.) (MM)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED295192

HOW TO BE A YOUNG MEMBER OF THE MIDDLE CLASS: SOCIALIZATION IN THE NOVELS OF JUDY BLUME

by

Joyce A. Litton

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Joyce A. Litton

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☐ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

CS211286

Books, like other sources of information with which young people come into contact, have a definite effect on the ways in which young people are socialized. The widespread popularity of the novels of Judy Blume makes them important factors in the socialization process. Blume contributes to the ways in which youngsters take on the values which she regards as important. Almost all of the characters in her books are members of the middle or upper-middle class, and with the exception of some of the characters in four of her fifteen novels, all are white. Thus, Blume is teaching youth how to be members of the white, middle or upper-middle class.

Blume's books deal with various problems which are of importance to young people. This study will consider the approaches which she takes to religion, sexuality, and death. In considering these different topics, this analysis will raise several questions: Just what sorts of values will children develop who take Blume's books to heart? Why are her books so popular among young readers? What types of adults favor her books? What is so controversial in her books? Finally, do Blume's books have a strong impact on the socialization process?

Blume's treatment of religion is fairly well balanced, if rather bland, homogeneous, and secular. She discusses the topic of religion from the perspective of an eleven-year-old girl in Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret. Sixth grader, Margaret Simon, is the product of a mixed marriage. Her father was reared in the Jewish faith, her mother in a fairly conservative

Protestant home. Margaret's parents do not practice any religion, nor does she. Her parents have told Margaret that she can decide if she wants to practice a religion or not when she is an adult. Throughout the novel, Margaret carries on private conversations with God. Margaret's personal relationship with God in her daily conversations is that of a child. She tells him what is going on in her day, asks him for favors, thanks him, and at times bargains with him.[1]

For the first eleven and a half years of her life, Margaret has not found the absence of organized religion in her life to be a problem. However, when her parents move from New York City to suburban New Jersey, she finds that not having a religion makes her unusual, and with the pre-teen desire for conformity she begins to fear that she is not normal. For a year-long class project at school, she decides to do a personal study of religions. If she could determine, after the study, what religion she ought to practice, then she would know whether to join the Y or the Jewish Community Center--organizations to which all of her friends belong.

For her study, Margaret decides to attend religious services of various kinds and to read some standard works on Judaism, Catholicism, and Protestantism. For the most part, when she attends religious services, she does not understand the prayers, hymns, or sermons. She keeps wondering where the God to whom she confides her daily concerns is in these various houses of worship, for she cannot find him there.

Margaret undergoes a religious crisis when her mother's parents, the Hutchinses, come to visit. The crisis develops when

Grandmother Hutchins asks Margaret how she does in Sunday school, and Margaret tells her that she does not attend. Then Margaret's parents and grandparents begin an argument about her lack of religious training. They talk about her as if she is not there, and she yells that she does not need either religion or God. She leaves the room and promises that she is never going to talk to God again.

Margaret completes her year-long project on religion without choosing a religion for herself. She concludes that selecting a religion is a lengthy process because one changes one's mind and that twelve years old is too old an age at which to have to make the decision. Margaret resumes her conversations with God on the day that she has her first menstrual period. Throughout the book, she has been obsessed with getting her first period. In her conversation, she tells God that she knows that he is there, that he would not have missed her special day, and finally, she thanks him.

Blume's treatment of religion is commendable. She provides balance by showing Margaret's encounters with the three major American religions. She presents a God that pre-teens can understand, and she weaves the problem of religion with everyday experiences with which her young audiences can identify. Religion is a tricky subject with which to deal, and Blume insists, rightly, on doing it nonjudgmentally. True dogmatists will not accept this. However, most eleven-year-olds do not understand the doctrines of the major American denominations, and Blume does not deal with these doctrinal questions. It is also

doubtful that children of this age comprehend the meanings of formal prayers, hymns, or sermons which are pitched at an adult level.

Where Blume is to be especially commended is in devising Margaret's conversations with God. Margaret's God is someone who is concerned with daily happenings, who influences the events of one's life, and who is always there even when one has temporarily abandoned him. While this is not a sophisticated approach to God, it does give young people a positive idea of God which they can understand until they are old enough to develop a more complex conception. However, Blume's treatment of religion is not without flaws. Since she does not deal with dogma, the reader sees little difference between the three major denominations. All the religions rely on the same externals--formal prayers, hymns, and sermons. She does present Catholic confession, but the reader does not get a real idea of what this is about. Her presentation is so secular and so homogeneous that she really does not go beyond Margaret's mother's contention that "God is a nice idea. He belongs to everybody."[2]

The topic of developing sexuality is of concern to all young people, and it is an area of discussion that even today is characterized by ignorance and apprehension among many of them. Judy Blume has treated this controversial subject in several of her novels, and these books have been soundly criticized and in some instances banned. Blume discusses the sexual changes which occur at puberty for girls in Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret. and for boys in Then Again, Maybe I Won't. Discussions about the onset of menstruation are about as

extensive as discussions of religion in Are You There God? The girls in Margaret's secret club are curious, but they are basically well informed about what changes are occurring in their bodies. Unlike Louise Fitzhugh's The Long Secret, Are You There God? does not provide much in the way of anatomical or physiological explanations about menstruation. Nonetheless, the book's treatment of the topic is an improvement over the one in The Long Secret in an important way. In The Long Secret, menstruation is viewed as a painful and unpleasant occurrence. In Are You There God? menstruation is looked upon as a joyful rite of passage.[3]

In Then Again, Maybe I Won't, Blume discusses puberty from the male standpoint. The approach is so explicit that more conservative adults, especially those who think that discussions of sex are inappropriate in books for children, may not approve. The novel's protagonist, Tony Miglione, describes his embarrassment at having his first wet dream and at having erections when he is not thinking about sex. The one part of the book which might be most objectionable to conservative adults deals with Tony's voyeurism. His bedroom window faces the bedroom window of sixteen-year-old Lisa Hoober. Lisa does not pull down her shades at night, and Tony habitually watches her undress. What is written about sexuality in Then Again, Maybe I Won't is innocent and should be reassuring to pubescent boys. Blume does an excellent job of seeing things from a boy's perspective.

In Deenie, Blume breaks another taboo and discusses

masturbation. The presentation is very clear, comprehensible to the young reader and psychologically sound. Its inclusion in the book should do much to dispel the scare stories which have surrounded this normal practice.[4]

Perhaps the most controversial of Blume's books on sexuality is her young adult novel, Forever. This novel deals with the developing intimacy between two seventeen-year-old high school seniors, Katherine and Michael. At the request of her daughter, Randy, Blume wrote a novel where two teenagers who are in love decide to have sexual intercourse and do not suffer unbearable consequences. In Forever, a touching and pleasant romance, nothing is left to the reader's imagination. The reader follows Kath and Michael from their first meeting and first kiss to their intimate bedroom scenes. The sex in which Michael and Kath engage is responsible; they use birth control. They begin by using condoms, and then Katherine goes to Planned Parenthood and gets a prescription for birth control pills. Adult students of this novel should approve of this point because it teaches a worthwhile lesson at a time when teenage pregnancy is high, but it is probable that deeply religious and conservative adults will disapprove of Kath's being able to get contraceptives without parental consent. Although the general tone of the novel is upbeat, it does contain some unpleasantness. Kath's friend, Sybil, has an unplanned pregnancy and decides to have the baby and give it up for adoption. When Kath and one of her friends learn about Sybil's pregnancy, they both decide that if they were she, they would have an abortion. This casual approach to abortion is likely to offend some people. All in all, Forever is

a romantic, yet realistic look at first love which is appropriate for young adult readers. Although Blume is not dogmatic, one can infer that the book is an endorsement of safe teen sex.[5]

Blume treats the topic of death, which should be less controversial, but is not, in Forever and Tiger Eyes. In Forever, Katherine's grandfather has had a stroke; as a result, he walks with a cane and has trouble finishing his sentences. Katherine is very close to him. He has another stroke and dies while Katherine is away working at a summer camp; she wants to go home to be with her mother and grandmother. Katherine's parents want her to stay at camp and break the news to Jamie, her younger sister. Katherine is sad about her grandfather's death. She shows a normal reaction to the fear of death when she passionately kisses Theo, the tennis coach, the night that she learns of the death. People who have recently learned of the death of someone close to them sometimes experience a strong sexual urge, Blume believes. They want to engage in sexual activity to affirm that they are alive.[6]

Tiger Eyes is a novel which is devoted entirely to the ways in which Davey Wexler responds to the death of her father. Davey's father was shot and killed by a robber who came into his 7-Eleven store. Davey watched helplessly as her father's life ebbed away. All of Davey's reactions to her father's death are fairly normal. She is not only sad that he had to die, but she is also angry about it. The violent nature of her father's death has made her fearful, and she sleeps with a bread knife under her pillow.

Davey's mother has difficulty accepting her husband's death. Mrs. Wexler becomes depressed, has serious headaches, and must eventually see a psychotherapist. Davey's mother's inability to cope makes it more difficult for Davey to deal with her father's death. She wants to talk with her mother about her father and her feelings toward him. Yet, she knows that her mother is not in a sufficiently strong emotional state to discuss these matters. Davey feels that she and her mother have reversed roles.

Several things happen which enable Davey to accept her father's death and to remember fondly the good things about him. While working as a candy striper at a local hospital, Davey meets Mr. Ortiz who is dying of cancer. She is able to cry over his death in a way that she was unable to mourn for her father. Davey's mother arranges for Davey to have some sessions with her psychotherapist. Finally, Davey's mother regains her emotional stability and is able to talk with Davey on an adult level.

Blume's treatment of death gives young people some idea about what normal feelings about death are as she defines them. Her definition is secular, and she does not raise the issue that some people believe in a life after death. Some critics of Tiger Eyes have said that denying Davey a stable mother who can help her cope with her father's death flaws the novel. To me, it merely makes the novel more realistic. The depiction of death in Forever though much shorter and of a different magnitude gives young people a good idea about how one feels the first time a person loses someone with whom he or she is close. Ordinarily, a youngster will lose a grandparent before he or she loses a

parent.

There is little doubt that Blume's books appeal to children and young adults. Sales figures prove this, and Blume, herself, reproduced some of the large numbers of letters she received from her young fans in Letters to Judy. It is not difficult to explain why she is so popular. Her dialogue is the argot of the young; she creates credible young characters who think like her young readers. Blume has admitted that although she knows there is an adult side to issues, that she intentionally writes from the child's or young adult's perspective. All of these factors make her books captivating to her young audience. By creating believable young people and fallible parents and other adults with whom young people can at times find fault, Blume has developed an ideal situation for furthering her values. She can have realistic dialogue and then introduce her own views on religion, sex, and death. She does this so painlessly that it seems likely that the views will be absorbed. [7]

Girls who might never think seriously about religion will read Are You There God? because they identify with Margaret's concern about her pubescent development, her association with the members of her secret club, and the school day antics of the pre-teen set. From pre-teens to adolescents, young people are concerned with their developing sexuality. Young people can identify with the problems of Margaret, Tony, Deenie, and Katherine. They learn that it is all right to worry about physical development, to masturbate, and to engage responsibly in sexual intercourse. As they follow the lives of likeable

characters such as Kath and Davey, they learn that experiencing the death of a loved one is a time for a mixture of emotions--sadness, anger, fear, and life affirmation. Blume has made the characters so appealing that her readers are very likely to imbibe her middle- to upper-middle class, urban, liberal, secular values.

While Blume has plenty of adult critics on the political and religious Right, there are numerous adults who want their children and adolescents to read her books. These people are much like Blume. They are educated, predominately urban, middle- to upper-middle class, liberal, and secular in their outlook. They want the young people in whom they are interested to approach religion from a non-dogmatic, non-fundamentalist perspective. They want pre-teens and adolescents to be comfortable with their developing sexuality. Unlike more conservative critics, they do not want youngsters to be shielded from the realities of death and dying. Instead, they want the young to be exposed to books which can provide bibliotherapy when they must confront real deaths in their own experience.

While it is not difficult to explain why Blume appeals to the young and why she has an adult set of fans as well, it is difficult to answer definitively the question of whether her books do socialize the young. There is no doubt that books do have some role in the process, but it difficult to determine the extent of the influence. Books are not as influential as the socialization agencies of the family, the school, and the youth peer group. However, it does seem that books can help to support those values which are in tandem with these other agencies, and

that books can also raise questions in young people's minds when what is presented in books is at odds with their daily experience. Thus, perhaps supporters of Blume are wise to fight against censorship of her books, and detractors are right to be afraid of her.

NOTES

[1]Judy Blume, Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret. (New York: Dell Publishing Co., Inc., 1970).

[2]Ibid., p.14.

[3]Judy Blume, Then Again, Maybe I Won't (New York: Dell Publishing Co., Inc., 1971); Louise Fitzhugh, The Long Secret (New York: Dell Publishing Co., Inc., 1965), pp.92-97.

[4]Judy Blume, Deenie (New York: Dell Publishing Co., Inc., 1973), pp.82-85.

[5]Judy Blume, Forever... (New York: Pocket Books, 1975).

[6]Judy Blume, Tiger Eyes (Scarsdale, New York: Bradbury Press, 1981).

[7]Judy Blume, Letters to Judy: What Your Kids Wish They Could Tell You (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1986).